

## International Response to the Cheonan Incident and Changes in the Northeast Asian Strategic Environment

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The explosive force of an underwater torpedo against the ocean floor is powerful, and when the wreckage settles to the bottom it can be difficult to find. It was with this in mind that North Korea decided to launch its surprise attack on the Cheonan.

However, North Korea's gambit was exposed by the "international civilian/military joint investigative team," and amidst international condemnations the Cheonan incident is being treated as an international security issue.

Due to the North Korea factor, the Northeast Asian international order has been shaped around the US/ROK alliance and the US/Japan alliance, with the US forming the connecting axis, while China has been relegated to a state of isolation among the participants in the 6-Party Talks.

### 1. The Sinking of the Cheonan as an International Security Incident

The civilian/military joint investigative team, composed of 24 experts from Korea, the US, Australia, the UK, and Sweden, announced "The Results of the Investigation into the Cheonan Sinking Incident" on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

"The Results of the Investigation into the Cheonan Sinking Incident" concluded, using the North Korean-made propeller and motor of the torpedo which were collected from the area of the sinking as the decisive pieces of evidence, that the Cheonan was sunk by the underwater explosion of a torpedo launched from a North Korean submarine.

As it becomes clear from the scientific, objective investigation by the international civilian/military joint team that a surprise torpedo attack by North Korea sank the Cheonan, international criticism of North Korea is growing.

23 countries, including the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, France, and Sweden, as well as the Secretary General of the UN, the EU, and NATO all expressed complete support for the investigation's conclusions and made declarations of concern, criticism, and condemnation towards North Korea's act of aggression.

For instance, in the US, the Cheonan incident formed the central issue at a regular briefing of the White House, the State Department, and the Defense Department, and a White House spokesman made a statement (on May 15<sup>th</sup>, local time) criticizing North Korea, saying the attack "constitutes a challenge to international peace and security and is a violation of the Armistice Agreement" and adding that North Korea's behavior "reinforces the resolve of its neighbors to intensify their cooperation to safeguard peace and stability in the region against all provocations."

Japan convened an "Emergency Cabinet Meeting" (5.20) led by the Prime Minister in which they roundly criticized North Korea's "unforgivable" behavior, condemning it as "a violation of international law and a challenge to international peace and security."

The EU also delivered a statement critical of North Korea, saying "North Korea's behavior is a clear violation of international law which presents a serious threat to security in Northeast Asia." France in particular condemned North Korea's torpedo attack as an act of "murderous violence." The UK expressed its opinion through a statement by its Ministry of Defense saying "The UK experts are in no doubt as to the veracity of the investigation's findings."

Canada decided to add the "Cheonan incident" as an emergency security agenda item to be discussed at the June 2010 G8 Summit.

Thus the international community has acknowledged the Cheonan sinking as an incident with significance far beyond inter-Korean relations. They are treating North Korea's provocative act as a security issue which threatens international peace and the stability of the Northeast Asian region.



## 2. Impact of the Cheonan Incident and Changes to Northeast Asia's Strategic Environment and Structure

Following the announcement of the conclusions of the civilian/military joint investigation team, President Lee Myung Bak called an emergency meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), and then made a statement to the nation on the Cheonan Incident.

The main points mentioned in the President's statement were: ▲a blockade of passage by North Korean ships through South Korean territorial waters ▲suspension of South-North trade and exchanges ▲adherence to the principle of direct deterrence in response to North Korean provocations ▲presentation of the Cheonan issue to the UN Security Council. This is judged to be the greatest paradigm shift in North Korean relations in 10 years.

The US and Japan expressed their wholehearted support for the President's statement.

The US, in a statement by the White House spokesperson (5.24), called it “entirely appropriate” and expressed complete support, while President Obama instructed US military commanders to work closely with South Korea to stop additional attacks by North Korea (5.24). This was a strong message of warning to North Korea from South Korea's ally. Further, the US Senate and House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning North Korea's action (5.25), the incident is likely to influence the US-China “Strategic Economic Talks,” and on May 26<sup>th</sup> US Secretary of State Clinton indicated US intentions to apply multiple forms of pressure on North Korea including strong financial sanctions.

Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama directly called a session of the Security Council (5.24) which declared that “North Korea is a threat not only to South Korea but to Japan as well,” and consequently issued a directive to consider “additional North Korean sanctions.” In a phone call to Lee Myung Bak, Hatoyama made clear that “We will cooperate fully with the South Korean government's position.” Thus Japan as well as the US is considering strong financial sanctions to cut off the sources of funds to members of the North Korean elite and military.

Russian President Medvedev, in a phone call (5.25) to President Lee Myung Bak, remarked “We fully understand the countermeasures against North Korea outlined in your ‘statement to the nation’” and promised “We will work to send the proper signals to North Korea in order to preserve peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.” He further emphasized, “We are prepared to closely cooperate with South Korea on a response, including sending this issue to the UN Security Council.”



On the other hand, China reiterated its previous position of emphasizing restraint and a calm, thorough response from all the countries concerned, avoided making any specific comment on the South Korean President’s “statement to the nation,” and appeared to behave purely as “North Korea’s patron.” Chinese intellectuals have expressed critical views of this, and the government-run newspaper *Global Times* published an editorial adding to the pressure, calling for a sincere investigation and an explanation for the suspicions. Yet despite strong persuasion from the US, China appears unable to fulfill its role as a responsible nation in the region.

Under these conditions, as the ROK, US, and Japan cooperate closely and develop a “pressure and persuasion” diplomacy towards China, the North Korea factor is also having an impact on the Northeast Asian strategic environment. Following on the heels of the economic crisis, China’s rise as the number 2 global power and its increasing influence in global society, as well as the weakening of US power and the start of US-China strategic talks, the Futenma base issue and US-Japan friction, the tightening of the China-Japan relationship, and Kim Jong Il’s China visit, all have led to the anticipation of changes in the strategic environment and structure of Northeast Asia.

However, since the Cheonan incident has provided an opportunity for a new US offensive diplomacy towards Asia, a return to a stronger US-Japan alliance, a reunified and more cooperative ROK-US-Japan structure, and a stronger Korea-US-Japan-Australia security alliance, such prospects have faded. Thus, alongside the unfolding diplomatic battle over the Cheonan incident, leadership has fallen to the key US-backed alliances of ROK-US and US-Japan.

Meanwhile, China has been unable to take charge and act properly as a leader in Asia during a regional security crisis situation, and its pro-North Korea stance has driven it into an isolated position in the 6-Party Talks. Thus, as China’s justification for disregarding international trends and public opinion grows weaker, it will see its biased pro-North Korea policy fast approaching its limits.

